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# Gorbachev on Stage

## In Political Theater, Soviet Leader Seems To Challenge Reagan as the Communicator

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WASHINGTON, April 8 — With a piece of well-timed diplomacy addressed largely to Western Europe, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, has quickly shown himself ready to challenge President Reagan in the court of international public relations.

**News Analysis** Officially, members of the Reagan Administration have brushed aside Mr. Gorbachev's six-month moratorium on missile deployment in Europe as nothing new and have accused him of breaking the confidentiality of the Geneva arms talks by making public part of the Soviet negotiating position.

But privately, the American officials express grudging respect for the Soviet leader's knack for diplomatic theater and his keen sense of political timing.

They were particularly struck that his first move on arms control came on Easter Sunday, as Western Europeans were demonstrating near American missile bases and as a Congressional delegation and the Dutch Foreign Minister were arriving in Moscow for talks.

"It is a whole new ball game," an official said. "Gorbachev is going to be good at public relations. He is going to be good at the substance. He is casting himself as the peacemaker. He is a real Pied Piper. Who can be against stopping the arms race? I think the Europeans are going to be beguiled by this guy."

### Leadership No Longer Paralyzed

For others, Mr. Gorbachev's opening maneuver was a signal that President Reagan no longer had the almost automatic advantage in personal and public relations that he has had over three ailing Soviet leaders whose infirmities undercut their force on the world stage.

"The free lunch period is over," said Seweryn Bialer, director of Columbia University's Research Institute for International Change. "The Soviet Union in the last four years has had a paralyzed leadership and a fragmentation of power. Now it has someone who can unite the leadership and develop momentum. This is the beginning of an active foreign policy that does not simply react to events, but tries to seize the initiative."

Even before Mr. Gorbachev has had time to consolidate his power base at home, he has imparted momentum to Soviet diplomacy and, for the moment, taken the initiative away from President Reagan and his program for a space-based defense.

"Gorbachev has not added any new element to the arms control equation," an American diplomat said. "But clearly he is going to be a lot more trouble than anybody we have dealt with in recent years. He is more aggressive. He is more active. He is more articulate. And he projects better."

"He sees that the game is still principally political theater and influencing our Europeans friends. And he chose a good date to show he is willing to play in the same league as Reagan."

Administration spokesmen voiced disappointment that Mr. Gorbachev's proposals did not break new ground or, as one official put it, maintain "a climate of promise" for negotiations rather than being a "slick" propaganda tactic.

But others suggested that the Soviet leader appeared to be deftly holding the world at bay with an attractive sounding public position without making changes of policy that would arouse potential opposition in the Politburo before he has won full control.

In 1982, Leonid I. Brezhnev announced a moratorium on Soviet SS-20 missile deployments in Europe and his successor, Yuri N. Andropov, endorsed it, but American intelligence officials said Moscow never observed the moratorium. Mr. Gorbachev's predecessor,

Konstantin U. Chernenko, proposed a moratorium on testing antisatellite weapons last summer, but President Reagan turned down that proposal.

With his new moratorium, Mr. Gorbachev seems tacitly to have accepted the presence of 102 American medium-range missiles in Western Europe, something that his predecessors repeatedly opposed.

The swift White House effort to discount his move was evidence of the Administration's concern about the political impact. Even though it was Easter Sunday, the White House produced a reaction statement only an hour after receiving news reports from Moscow and also provided spokesmen for the three morning television shows today.

### Timed for Dutch Decision

Washington's assumption was that the duration of the Soviet moratorium, which is to run through November, was timed to put pressure on the Dutch Government, which must decide in November whether to go ahead with scheduled deployment of the cruise missiles.

Moreover, some analysts noted, Mr. Gorbachev's positive reaction to a summit meeting and his assertions that "confrontation is not an inborn defect" of Soviet-American relations were directed at Western European opinion and at Congress as it debates the pace of the American military buildup.

By not committing himself to a date and place for meeting President Reagan, Mr. Gorbachev has left himself room for maneuver and, as Marshal D. Shulman of Columbia University suggested, possibly for a visit to some other country like France or West Germany beforehand.

Among others, Dr. Shulman, who is director of the Harriman Institute of Advanced Soviet Studies at Columbia, suggested that Mr. Gorbachev seems now to be probing to see whether the improvement in the atmosphere of Soviet-American relations can "lead to substantive agreements" to curb the arms race before committing himself to a meeting with Mr. Reagan.